

NEW BLOCS FOR OLD IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Anti-Nasserism Is Not Enough

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A YEAR ago, relaxed and confident, Gamal Abdel Nasser straddled the Near East contemplating the interlaced ellipses of his ambition: Levant, Arab League states, Moslem Asia, North and East Africa. Like Benito Mussolini, he sought to rid his people of its ancient scourge of too many mouths and too few acres to feed them; and his remedy, too, was expansionist. From Cairo, the wide undercultivated spaces of Sudan and the Fertile Crescent look like Allah's answer to Egyptian prayers, with Arabian-Iraqi oil royalties and Levantine pipeline revenues thrown in for good measure. Mere agrarian reform, on the other hand, proved unexpectedly complex, added nothing very much to the sum total of Egypt's resources, and carried little kudos in the all important delta towns—where parades and xenophobic ranting were the thing.

Also like Benito Mussolini, President Abdel Nasser lacked neither diplomatic dupes—a new Hoare-Laval pact would undoubtedly have consecrated a partition of Israel in his favor had he proved able to impose one—nor cohorts of lesser fans captivated by his charm, fundamental reasonableness, and almost punctual trains. His influence was rampant, his shadow ubiquitous; his portrait dominated diplomatic salon and Baghdad slum.

Today, he has a deflated, lonely look, his bearing too tense, his eyes too bright, his

smile too patently ingratiating. His portrait has been thrown out of at least half the cafés and barber shops it once adorned in Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, and Iraq, and is being displaced even in Syria by Marilyn Monroe's less mercurial charms. His three-power (Egypt-Syria-Jordan) "joint command"—the noose with which, his propagandists boasted, he would strangle Israel—has frayed. Egyptian-Saudi collaboration is in cold storage. Spontaneous anti-Nasser slogans were heard during the Lebanese elections in the end of June, when pro-Egyptian candidates were soundly trounced.

The inter-Arab balance has for the first time tilted in favor of Iraq. The Hashemite regime in Baghdad, which had no overt Arab friends twelve months ago, is today the hinge of an exuberant anti-Nasser coalition consisting of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and (more discreetly) Libya, with King Saud hovering sympathetically on its fringes. All the members of this coalition have subscribed to the Eisenhower doctrine; and Iraq is further linked to the West through the Baghdad Pact. All are receiving American economic and military aid, and Iraq and Saudi-Arabia command important oil royalties. In contrast, Egypt's only allies are Syria and primitive Yemen. None of the Egyptian-bloc states possesses oil; none is receiving substantial economic aid from any source. Egypt and Syria have accepted military aid from the Soviet bloc, but everything delivered them has to be paid for, though at bargain rates.

THIS regrouping was brought about by the separate, uncoordinated efforts of the United States government, Israel, and Abdel Nasser himself.

The United States set the stage by refus-

THE anti-Nasser bloc whose emergence George Lichtheim signaled in our June issue ("The U.S. Backs the Arab Monarchs") is here scrutinized by RAY ALAN, a British journalist and Middle East specialist who knows the Arab world from intimate association. Mr. Alan's last previous contribution to these pages, on troubled Jordan, appeared in March.

ing to be blackmailed into financing the Aswan High Dam. Desirable as it would be to help a genuinely progressive, peace-loving Egyptian government to build the dam, this refusal was a necessary corrective of the impression then prevalent throughout the Near East that America was an easy mark, and that the more you flirted with Moscow the more you were likely to get. More recently the United States government came to terms with reality by mastering the pactomania that afflicted it so badly during President Eisenhower's first term. The mission headed by Special Ambassador James P. Richards did a remarkably solid job in convincing the main Near Eastern governments that the Eisenhower Doctrine was not just another pactomaniac device but, for all its woolliness and even evasiveness on such issues as the Communist Trojan horse in Syria, an honest attempt to stabilize the region within as supple a framework as possible. The inclusion of Israel in the Doctrine, and the offer to include Syria and Egypt, ruled out in advance the possibility of muddying the issue of regional security with anti-Israel, anti-Indian, or anti-Egyptian *arrière-pensées* as had happened when the Baghdad Pact was launched.

Israel's role in puncturing Abdel Nasser's Mussolinian pretensions is summed up in the word Sinai. Even taking into account recent French claims to a great deal of the credit the Israeli defense forces originally got, there can be no doubt that Israel's unexpected vigor smashed the morale of the Egyptian army (Egyptian private soldiers will not speedily forget the mass flight of their officers in the face of the Israeli advance), put a high premium on caution in Jordan, Syria, and Saudi-Arabia, and knocked a central plank out of every Arab demagogue's platform. In the process it lessened the pressure Cairo could exert on other Arab states.

President Abdel Nasser prepared the way for a Saudi-Iraqi rapprochement the moment he and his Syrian allies highlighted the common interests of Riyadh and Baghdad by interrupting their oil exports to the West.

But his major contribution to the reorientation of responsible Arab opinion was undoubtedly that summed up in this passage from an editorial in the Beirut Arabic daily *An-Nahar*, by no means a slavishly pro-Western organ:

Egyptian military attachés have had to be expelled from Libya, Ethiopia, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan. They have shown themselves to be not diplomats but the instruments of a policy of disruption, a policy against which the self-respecting Arab governments are now in revolt.

Similarly, Egyptian press correspondents and the directors of Egyptian information offices have everywhere created a bad impression. They have acted not as journalists but as the agents of Egyptian secret services.

The activities of men such as these have provoked complaints in every Arab state. . . . And now the Arab world has had enough of Egyptian trouble-making; and it has plucked up the courage to tell Cairo so bluntly.

To this catalogue one might add Gamal Abdel Nasser's gaffe in authorizing his military attaché in Riyadh to establish an "activist" cell of pro-Egyptian Saudi extremists. King Saud personally must further have been displeased—to say the least—by the so-called "secret speech" delivered by the Cairo dictator in March to a group of senior officers. (Its text was communicated to the Iraqi authorities by an Egyptian officer who subsequently sought asylum in Baghdad, and circulated by them to selected Arab diplomats.) In it Abdel Nasser praised his military attachés for their devotion to Egypt's cause, asserted Egypt's right "as a free nation" to employ whatever means she desired of bringing other Arab states "under her flag," declared that Libya, Tunisia, Sudan, Iraq, and "much of Arabia" must still be considered Western-dominated, and announced that Egypt had ordered bombers from the Soviet Union capable of reaching Tripoli (Libya), Khartoum, and Riyadh "as well as Tel Aviv"!

Even so, it is doubtful whether King Saud would have drifted quite so demonstratively out of Cairo's orbit, or Hussein launched his desperate counter-coup, or tiny Lebanon rejected Nasser's hegemony with such vigor,

had American policy still been hamstrung by the pactomanes and had not Israel drawn the Egyptian army's teeth in Sinai.

THUS, in less than a year, Egyptian and Syrian irresponsibility have been contained and the Jordanian variety bottled up. A brief breathing space has been won for political consolidation and economic development in Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, and perhaps Jordan: pro-Western moderates have a fair chance to show their mettle and the U.S. government to demonstrate the value of its friendship. Above all, for the first time in many years, realism has raised its unfamiliar head in Near Eastern affairs.

The West has stopped kidding itself about the military worth of the Baghdad Pact and is quietly giving priority to economic and technical cooperation and the development of communications between the pact's Asian signatories. The recent Baghdad Pact Council meeting in Karachi (at which the U.S. government was represented by observers) floodlit once more the unwisdom of upbuilding Iraqi and Pakistani armaments to a level at which extremist pressure for military adventures in Israel or (in Pakistan's case) Kashmir might become irresistible. Simultaneously, the U.S. State Department has given its allies a welcome lead in refusing to acquiesce (as Sir Anthony Eden, for all his subsequent bravura, had acquiesced) in Egypt's blockade of the Straits of Tiran and Gulf of Aqaba.

On the Arab side of the hill, King Saud is reported by British officials to have greatly reduced his expenditure on anti-British and anti-Hashemite propaganda (though he may merely be economizing, his treasury being again in the red), and throughout the Arabic-speaking states the diminishing band of demagogues who still talk about throwing Israel into the sea inspire more shrugs than cheers. King Hussein of Jordan is the only front-rank leader still beating this drum with anything like persistence, and he is doing so only because he is at his wits' end for a means of erasing from nationalist minds the memory of his recent anti-nationalist purge.

In June and July rumors flashed through the Arab capitals—without raising any untoward howl—of secret negotiations under Washington's aegis for an Arab-Israel settlement, the first step to be refugee resettlement and compensation. Opposition candidates tried to make an election issue of them in Lebanon, accusing the government of betraying Arab rights, but apparently did themselves more harm than the government. An Iraqi government official told foreign pressmen that Iraq, in need of immigrants, was able and willing to absorb Palestinian refugees, a solution long favored by Western experts as benefiting both refugees and Iraq but hitherto unmentionable in public in Baghdad. Even Abdel-Khalek Hassouna, Cairo-controlled secretary general of the Arab League, called for an Arab-Israel settlement, though for appearance's sake declared that it must be based on the 1947 Partition Plan (which the Arab League states then opposed by force of arms).

In Egyptian official circles, too, the anti-Israel crusade has lost much of its old éclat. Israel figured only incidentally in the junta's violent radio campaign during the first half of June against King Hussein and "American imperialism." And toward the end of June the attention of Egypt's captive public opinion was directed mainly to internal affairs—in particular, the social and economic problems whose complexity originally deflected Gamal Abdel Nasser onto the smoother-seeming high road of foreign adventure and aggrandizement. This trend was connected partly with the token single-ticket "election" President Abdel Nasser organized in the first week of July (after arbitrarily rejecting nearly half the candidates) and partly with his efforts to persuade Britain and the U.S. to normalize their financial relations with him and release Egypt's frozen assets; on the other hand, perceptible social advances are undoubtedly necessary to revive the regime's "revolutionary" pretensions, compensate for its foreign policy reverses, and recapture the allegiances of once enthusiastic professional, "intellectual," and student circles that have in recent months

taken refuge in near-Communism and apolitical skepticism.

YET despite these—on the whole—positive developments the Near Eastern outlook is by no means unclouded. An ugly patch of nimbus overhangs Western moral pretensions. By now the remotest Bedouin has heard, if only on his sheikh's car radio, the West's proud claim to be the Free World, civilization's bulwark against the Communist system of government by coup, electoral fraud, and oligarchy. But since Hussein put the clock back in Amman, these are the very phenomena articulate Arabs associate with Western influence. The Four Freedoms have been banished from Jordan almost as ruthlessly as they are excluded from Saudi Arabia; and Iraq is still governed by an administration based on elections cooked so as to permit Iraq's adherence to the Baghdad Pact. Only the democratic Lebanese and Israelis, as peoples, have had an opportunity of choosing freely to associate with the West.

This anomaly has material as well as moral drawbacks. The hard outer crust of Near Eastern autocracies is notoriously brittle. A coup d'état could reorientate Iraq or Jordan overnight. The growth of a professional officers' corps and the spread of radio-listening in Saudi Arabia are beginning to undermine the pillars of King Saud's medieval tyranny.

Even granted Saud's survival for a few more years, his political collaboration with the West would hardly outlast an Iraqi turn-about or a substantial revival of Egypt's fortunes in some other sphere. It is already sufficiently tentative, and Saud has no desire to incur the all-out wrath of Cairo's inescapable "Voice of the Arabs," most popular radio station in his kingdom. After assuring the Iraqi authorities, in the course of his state visit to Baghdad this spring, that he favored "liquidation" of "Communist influence" in Syria, a formula the Iraqis were eager to interpret as intimating his endorsement at long last of their desire to sort out the affairs of their troublesome neighbor, he sent a personal envoy to Damascus, Syr-

ian-born Sheikh Yusef Yassin, to assure President Kuwatly and the Syrian general staff that he had conceded the Hashemites nothing that might compromise Syrian independence. (Syrian-Saudi relations were later troubled, however, by a critical reference to the king by Syrian Defense Minister Khaled el-Azm, who, as a banking expert and former director of the leading Levantine bank, knows a great deal about the Saudis' financial affairs. He declared bluntly that the king was pretending to go along with Washington not because he liked Ike but for love of the dollar.) In June King Saud commended the virtues of caution and temporization to Hussein, urging him not to allow his grudge against Abdel Nasser to get him out on a limb. The communiqué issued after the Amman talks reaffirmed both kings' fidelity to the Egyptian-sponsored Arab solidarity pact and their desire to strengthen military cooperation with Egypt and Syria!

FOR their part, palace circles in Baghdad and Amman are presently inclined more to rashness than to caution. Jordanian and Iraqi papers have been allowed to proclaim the Hashemites' determination to "support any move by the Syrian people to shake off their fetters." A new variant of Fertile Crescent Union has made its appearance in the two Hashemite capitals in the shape of a plan to partition Syria between Iraq and Jordan—after, of course, a fetter-shaking coup in Damascus whose authors would at once call a high-level conference there of interested parties. Iraq would acquire a unified Euphrates valley and her desperately desired outlet to the Mediterranean; Jordan would get everything south of Homs.

Union and federation plans flourish like asphodels along the humpback bridge of cultivation that links Beirut with Baghdad (the area has always been a passageway for migration and the interchange of goods and ideas, with a healthy contempt for frontiers), but this one is more detailed and pays more attention to economics than most. It even, for the first time, takes into account

Israel, Turkey, and Saudi-Arabia, which have all, for various reasons, made known their opposition to an outright Iraqi-Syrian merger in the past. The plan's purpose, its advocates say, is to sort out the present artificial Levantine patchwork, a relic of the Anglo-French carve-up of Ottoman possessions after World War I, into more natural geographic and economic units. Damascus, they point out, is separated from northern Syria by mountain and desert, but is the natural capital both of southern Syria and of the greater part of what is now Jordan. The mercantile-minded populations of Aleppo and Latakia, chafing under their subordination to Damascus in an economically circumscribed Lesser Syria, have long sought effective links with their Mesopotamian hinterland.

As Iraqis outline it, the plan would make everyone happy. The improvement of lateral communications across northern Syria would provide employment for both Syrians and Palestinians and open up the area for intensive agrarian development. This in turn would render feasible the exploitation of the vast power and irrigation potential of the upper Euphrates, which the present Syrian regime has neither the will nor the capital to harness. The Iraq Petroleum Company would be spared the expense and technical headaches involved in routing its new Mediterranean pipeline via Turkey (so as to bypass unstable Syria). Hussein, if he could stay alive, would find himself equipped for the first time with a viable kingdom, based economically on the rich Damascus oasis and the grain-exporting Hauran. Political unification of the Hauran and what is now eastern Jordan, a natural economic unit, would make possible rational development of the Yarmuk valley, at present divided between Jordan and Syria.

King Saud could be given Aqaba if need be, thus realizing an old Saudi dream, as the price of his acquiescence in the arrangement, and the Turks might take the fertile Kameshliye "ducksbill" region of northeastern Syria whose sparse population is Anatolian rather than Levantine—though they

would be glad enough, without territorial inducement, to approve any arrangement that would give them a stable southern neighbor reconciled to Turkish possession of Iskenderon (Alexandretta).^{*} Israel would not tolerate the establishment of Iraqi administrators and frontier forces on her eastern border in the absence of an Israeli-Iraqi armistice; she is not, however, in the least enamored of the present, provocative Syrian regime, and Hashemite frontier-draughtsmen believe she would not object if King Hussein moved the center of gravity of his kingdom northward to Damascus.

IN LEBANON, sympathy with Hashemite ambitions is suddenly strong. President Camille Chamoun has for years, in and out of office, maintained close personal ties with the rulers of Amman and Baghdad, but most politically conscious Lebanese tended until recently to dismiss Fertile Crescent Union as a British imperial scheme. Now that British influence has been erased in Jordan, and is more discreet in Iraq, they are inclined to reexamine the idea. Syria's chronic instability and repeated Syrian incursions into—and agitation inside—Lebanon (the Damascus Sûreté maintains an intermittent guerrilla war with Syrian exiles in Beirut and not long ago kidnapped a dissident member of parliament there in broad daylight) have convinced a majority of Lebanese that some such territorial reshuffle as the new Hashemite plan proposes must be sought if ever they are to have a tranquil inland frontier. Syria, one hears continually in Lebanese company, is not as at present constituted a politically viable state. Damascus and Aleppo have always been jealous of one another and always will be. To secure even a semblance of national unity Syrian governments, whatever their political color, are obliged continually to pick quarrels with their neighbors. At the moment they are at loggerheads with all five.

Lebanese pundits stress that the Syrian partition plan cannot, of course, go through

^{*}Acquired by Turkey in 1939.

on Hashemite initiative alone. They expect the West to endorse it fairly soon—before Iraq Petroleum Company experts get too deeply involved in the Turkish pipeline project—and see more than mere pan-Arab solidarity behind Iraq's thumbs-down on a Turkish terminal; they guess Nuri Pasha es-Said to be selling the plan to Whitehall during his present European vacation. Chain-drinking their morning coffee, however, they gloomily declare the project impracticable, since the British Foreign Office has lost its pristine enthusiasm for Near Eastern map-making, while the State Department is too legalistically inclined. "Washington will readily admit that Syria is a thorn in all its neighbors' flesh," they say, "but, since it's marked on the map, will forbid them to pluck it out." Which, in its Levantine way, is quite a compliment for Washington.

Yet Syria must somehow be made politically viable and Jordan economically viable if Levantine stability is to be insured on anything other than a month-to-month, coup-to-coup basis; and Levantine stability must so be insured if the present alignment of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and King Saud's right foot is to be maintained on the Western side of the inter-Arab fence. If the West's own experts can think up no surer means of achieving this end, expanding the area over which Iraqi oil royalties can be used to finance development, and simultaneously providing employment and resettlement opportunities for the Palestine refugees, they might do well to give some such plan sympathetic attention. Border adjustments may not, from afar, seem the region's most urgent need, but if they can help enlarge the present constricted framework for constructive action they are not to be scorned.

ALL this, of course, begs the question: what is to happen politically within the framework, constricted or otherwise? "Constructive action" cannot be exclusively economic and technical. Are the Western-influenced Arab states to remain blank spaces

on the Free World's political map? Is it seriously supposed by Western experts that Cadillacs, jet fighters, and hydro-electric schemes can underpin social and institutional anachronism indefinitely?

It would be nice to see the West transforming the territories of its Near Eastern friends into showpieces of democratic enlightenment for the edification of their neighbors. Israel and Lebanon are indeed pilot projects of democracy in action—hence the West's vested interest in their survival and prosperity. But the rest of the region (exclusive of Turkey) has not yet got round to considering democracy a necessity of life.

Even in states as far west as Italy and France, democracy is still, unhappily, a delicate plant; and in Spain and Portugal it has been trampled underfoot. It is not surprising, then, that it should so far have failed to take root in Near Eastern states which emerged from the Middle Ages only a generation or two ago. The practical political alternatives in Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and most other Arab states, in their present phase of development, are not democracy and authoritarianism but clique and clique—oligarchy and mob. If the present pro-Western governing cliques in Baghdad and Amman suddenly relaxed their oligarchic grip their successors would be mob-dominated anti-Western cliques—which would advance no one's interests, the Arabs' or the West's.

But to face this dismal fact frankly is not to venerate it—to consider the Arab oligarchies immutable features of the Near Eastern landscape and try, stupidly, to stem their subjects' evolution toward more liberal rule. Were the West to do so, the Soviets would prevail in this sector of the cold war without raising another finger: Near Eastern Communists are today as adept as their Western comrades of the 30's at posing as the standard-bearers of social and political progress. Nevertheless, because of past lapses and squandered opportunities, the West's dilemma is acute; and of the oligarchic states only Iraq presently offers a slim hope that it might be capable of resolution.

In Iraq, where 70 per cent of oil royalties is annually placed at the disposal of a zealous, Western-advised Development Board, the divergence and *décalage* between technical and political progress are more pronounced than anywhere else in the region. Superficially, under pressure of such intensive technical development, the country's taut political institutions seem bound to snap. But Western experts there are confident that evolution, not revolution, will carry the day. Their concentration on technical progress (which is, after all, what their Iraqi employers have hired them to concentrate on) is not wholly apolitical. In broadening Iraq's economic and administrative base, they point out, the Development Board's achievements must also inevitably broaden its social and political base, and thus gradually foster the conditions in which representative institutions can flourish. (Some local irrigation, flood control, and electrification schemes have already, on completion, been handed over to elected municipalities; municipal spending has increased 200 per cent in five years, and municipal powers—including the power to raise taxes—are broadening almost as fast; the desirability of a move toward administrative decentralization of control of certain completed works on a representative regional basis is under discussion between Development Board and government officials.) By 1967, Iraq's Western advisers say, if development continues at its present pace, it will be no more possible to run the country by the methods of Nuri Pasha es-Said—or those of Gamal Abdel Nasser—than to run General Motors as a Victorian family firm. Democratization will have become not merely a possibility but a practical necessity—if only in the interests of efficiency.

Even so, in the short-term perspective of cold war, 1967 seems a tremendous distance

away; and no account is taken in the argument of the Development Board officials I have quoted of the possibility that if democratization is vitiated by corruption or sheikhly sabotage the appeal of Communism will be enhanced in efficiency's name. Moreover, while Iraq—in the view of the men now shaping its economic future—has at least moved off at a purposeful pace, Saudi-Arabia and Jordan have not yet arrived at the starting tape. Saudi-Arabia is still living under Louis XIV, Jordan in 1788. Jordan might just make its leap into the 20th century, bypassing 1789, if liberated fairly speedily from the psychological and political burden of the Palestine refugees and supplied with massive Western aid (though she probably requires far more aid than the West feels it worthwhile dispensing); and a link with southern Syria (on the lines discussed above) would undoubtedly help.

Whatever the West decides on these scores, its information services need to be given an urgent assignment: to associate the West beyond all possibility of doubt in Near Eastern minds with democracy, and to stress that if the West happens to support one or two undemocratic regimes in the region it does so *faute de mieux*—because they are friendly, not because they are authoritarian. Such a line will raise a certain amount of incredulous laughter and may offend a few Saudi emirs, Iraqi sheikhs, and Jordanian politicians (all of whom need the West more than it needs them), but it could help counter the present paradoxical tendency within the Arab states for reformist and pro-democratic movements to develop, almost a priori, an anti-Western bias and assume that the West will automatically be against them. The present more or less pro-Western constellation of Arab states cannot be held together indefinitely by dislike of President Abdel Nasser or even fear of Communism.